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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses eight precepts that parents, educators, and society as a whole should follow to ensure that children in the United States enjoy a safe and secure environment. These proactive principles declare that: (1) every baby born in our country has the right to adequate health care; (2) guns, knives, and other potential weapons must not be available to children; (3) we must protect all children from injury or death by fire; (4) all children should live in a world free of unsafe levels of lead toxins; (5) caregivers need training in basic child growth and development and child rearing practices; (6) we must monitor television programming for children; (7) children need supervision by responsible caregivers overseeing their needs at all times; and (8) we must stop dangerous aggressive acts now through early identification and remedial programs. Includes 31 references. (MDM)

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SAFE ENVIRONMENTS FOR OUR CHILDREN: THE HOME, THE SCHOOL, AND THE COMMUNITY

Times change and with these changes come a whole new set of circumstances that affect every level of society. A macrosystem of changes within our country over the past few decades definitely has made life different for children. The fifties in the United States, though deficient in many aspects, has been nostalgically considered by many as the golden years for children. The home and school joined by the religious institutions worked together in character development and the general upbringing of children and youth (Goodlad, 1988). This was an era that was safe for the majority of children. This was a time when most children were safe from acts of violence such as shootings, stabbings, robberies, gang bangings, drug dealings, rapes, kidnappings, murders (both suicide and homicide), child abductions, and chiid abuses of both physical and emotional natures.

A RATIONALE FOR CHILDHOOD SAFETY

Edwards and Young (1992) wrote of the ripple effect of the actions of the home, school, and community in the life of the child and addressed the need for a strong partnership among the three. Sometime during the 1960's, in a rapidly changing society, this partnership was lost in our country as each began pulling away from the others. In this process, the child became caught in a web of negative effects as basic human needs necessary for a full life as described by Maslow (1968) became increasingly more difficult to obtain. This hierachy of needs clearly identified the necessity for children's basic physical needs of proper nourishment, sleep, clothing, shelter, and overall healthy environments to be met. Children must live in a safe and secure world that protects them from fears and incompetencies. Children need a sense of belonging that comes from affectionate loving people around them. A sense of worthiness and competence can be achieved as one's self esteem is elevated. Finally, one's talents and abilities to be independent responsible citizens emerge through self actualization only after other basic human needs are attained.

These basic human needs required for all children have met head on with societal changes. These changes occur often at a frightening pace. How can these needs be met with present conditions of widespread poverty, homelessness, migratory families, absense of adequate health care, school drop outs, street gangs, community crime and violence, drug and alcohol abuse, babies having babies, traditional family unit breakups, family violence and abuse, unsafe housing, insufficient numbers of law enforcement officers and correctional facilities, and overall questionable living conditions that have resulted? These widespread and unsafe living conditions affect the overall development of the child. People who care about children must take action by speaking out on their behalf and do it immediately.

SOCIETY'S RESPONSIBILITY FOR CHILDHOOD SAFETY

The home, the school and the community must reaffirm the importance of childhood in our society by uniting to serve as advocates in providing a safe environment, both physically and

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emotionally, for all children. This must be a joint endeavor. The role and responsibility of each overlaps and affects the others to a degree that it is difficult to establish distinct lines of responsibility (Edwards and Young, 1992). The following precepts, in no way intended to be comprehensive, are goals for all children and recommended as proactive as opposed to reactive measures when possible.

Every baby born in our country has the right to adequate health care.

Our nation's leaders should continue to seek adequate basic health care solutions for all Americans. Far too many homes are deficient in providing the basic need of health care both before and after a birth. This lack of care is due to financial and/or educational restraints. Boyer (1993) cites that one-fourth of all pregnant mothers in our country receive inadequate health care and some receive no care at all. Many of these are babies having babies with no concept of adequate nutrition and care of their own bodies nor that of the expectant baby. America's children are less healthy overall than they were ten years ago (Vogel, 1991).

The State of the World's Children (United Nations Children's Fund, 1993) report stressed the need for bringing an end to child malnutrition and preventative diseases. Progress has been made in the attempt to innoculate children for protection against known communicable diseases but far too many children, especially those under school age, are deficient. If not corrected, the community will be faced with the all too familiar pay-now or pay-later alternative involving moneys later spent to right the defiencies that result. In dealing with humane considerations for children's lives, society must pay now, not later.

Solutions to drug and alcohol addicted mothers birthing addicted babies will not come until society has answers for dealing with drug and alcohol abuse in the broader society. Annually, approximately 40,000 babies are damaged during pregnancy because of the mother's alcohol abuse (Boyer, 1993). Burgess and Streissguth (1992) relates fetal alcohol syndrome as the leading known cause of mental retardation in the western world. Boyer (1992) found that 10% of babies are born to mothers addicted to drugs such as cocaine, marijuana, crack, or heroin. Griffith's (1992) longitudinal research with babies addicted to cocaine and other drugs confirms a lack of sufficient time elapsing using solid research to know the long term prognosis of this addiction. Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) rates for children in this country under the age of thirteen, as reported by the Centers for Disease Controll in 1991, was 3,226. This number is inaccurately cited due to the unidentified or unreported positive cases. The drug exposed child usually has a multi-risk factor, in addition to drug problems, such as lack of medical care, impoverished learning environment, unpredictable parental behavior, and passive inhalation of smokable drugs (Tyler, 1992).

Guns, knives, and other potential weapons must not be available to children.

Weapons should never be a choice for solving conflict. The availability of potentially dangerous weapons must be eliminated and more appropriate methods of conflict resolutions must be taught to children. Kids are killing in the home, at school and on the streets and the media informs us that the rate is increasing (Kotulak, 1990).

As the nation's crime and violence increases it was predictable that such acts would spill over into the schools. The National Crime Survey (School Violence, 1992) (Perkins, 1993) reveals the staggering number of 3 million shootings, assaults, and other such crimes occurring

on or near our school campuses each year with approximately 16,000 of these crimes occurring daily, equal to one crime every six seconds. Fifty-four percent of middle schools and 56% of elementary school principals report more violent acts in their schools than five years ago. Each day 100,000 children carry guns to school (U.S. House of Representatives, KEEPING EVERY CHILD SAFE: CURBING THE EPIDEMIC OF VIOLENCE, l993). Elders, Surgeon General, estimates the number to be 135,000 (Elders, 1993). School violence in the past was centered around tough inner city schools but more recently has moved to suburban and rural America at an astounding rate.

Protect all children from injury or death by fire.

Many homes are unsafe because of fire hazards. The U.S. has one of the highest fire death rates per capita in the world with nine out of ten burn deaths occurring in the home as reported to the U.S. House of Representatives (U.S. House of Representatives, FIRE SAFETY: PROTECTING OUR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES, 1993). This hearing report confirms that African and Native American rates are more than twice the rate of whites. In these two groups, the rates are highest among young children living in lower socio-economic conditions. Reasons cited include cigarettes smoking that accounts for 35% of all fatal fires and 14% of fires that kill children under the age of fifteen, outmoded heating, bad wiring, dangerously hot tap water, too few smoke detectors, and inadequate parental supervision due to economic restraints.

This same report cited the risk of dying because of fire to be halved in houses with smoke detectors and that the effectiveness of smoke detectors is increased if a sprinkler system is also used. Smoke detector installation and the continued safe working of these must be required in all housing, especially high fire potential homes such as apartment and large housing complexes. Children should be instructed in making wise decisions concerning fire as was evidenced in a study of third graders lacking in knowledge about fire safety.

All children should live in a world free of unsafe levels of lead toxins.

Toxic matter ingested into the body continues to threaten the health of children. It leads to impaired neurobehavioral functioning even when small doses are absorbed into the body. High levels of lead content in the environment must be removed. The Public Health Service (Needlemen, 1992) has declared lead poisoning to be the most common and societally devastating environmental disease of young children and has the data to support the case. He estimates that 16% of children in America have blood lead levels in the neurotoxic range and this number hits heaviest in poverty African-American children. It is believed to be one of the most important and least acknowledged causes of school failure and learning disorders.

Community drinking water supplies must constantly be monitored for lead content and the costs of this is insufficient when children's health is endangered. Lead absorbtion through the drinking water supply in the community remains a health threat to identified cities with high lead levels areas such as New York City, Philadelphia, Detroit, and Washington, D.C. (Tyson and Hoversten, 1993). Moneys for monitoring are needed not only for water supplies, but, for any surfaces painted prior to the early 1970's and old automobiles transmitting lead fumes.

Caregivers need training in basic child growth and development and child rearing practices.

Any adult in charge of the child's overall safety and development must know something of the task they are performing. Parenting may result from nothing more than a biological process with children arriving in homes with primary caregivers knowing little about what to do with them. Greater geographical mobility of families limits the historical sharing by family and friends of child rearing practices (Short, 1988). These children may attend day care programs with 10 million other children today (Hoyt and Schoonmaker, 1992) with workers who lack sufficient knowledge about them. They later may enter formal school where ashamedly many certified adults are unskilled or prohibited from using appropriate practices (ie. corporal punishment, verbal abuse, inappropriate assessment). Sadly, these children may be the more fortunate ones in society. Thousands of children wake up each morning homeless through no fault of their own, most usually because there is insufficient low cost housing available, with no specific plans for the day (McCormick and Holden, 1992). No longer can children live so precariously. Hit and miss decisions about children can never substitute for what children must have in their lives to grow and develop full and productive lives. The results have immediate problems but the long term effects are overwhelming (Wingert and Kantrowitz, 1992). For serveral decades the learned have known a dearth of proven strategies about how children grow and develop and children's needs; putting theory into application and getting the knowledge out to caregivers has been the gap. Every endeavor possible must be made to assist caregivers in their role of safely caring for the physical and emotional needs of those youth they are charged to care for.

Monitor television programming for children.

Seventy-two percent of Americans, according to a national poll, attested to too much violence on television (Jennings, 1993). These Americans must band together to remove this unwanted violence transmitted to virtually every home. American children watch an average of 27 hours of programs each week averaging 3-5 hours per day. The American Pyschological Association found that the typical youngster in the U.S. had seen 8,000 murders on television by the seventh grade. Auntorities continue to argue the relationship of television viewing and the acting out of this violence. Many experts say most children under the age of four can not distinguish fact from fantasy even with the help of an adult (Maldonado, 1992).

Television has a long history of glorifying violence and more recently the violence is committed by the hero instead of the bad guy (School Violence, 1992). Maldonado (1992) states the discrepancy between the riches on television and the actual poverty in the lives of many of the viewers results in psychic violence. She found that children of heavy television viewing parents likewise viewed more television and based on Robinson's research, television and its' characters substituted for a a sense of community for many in today's society.

Children need supervision by responsible caregivers overseeing their needs at all times.

Fourteen percent of children are home alone for three or more hours each day (Hodgkinson, 1993) because 73% of school age children's mothers are working outside the home (McCormick, 1992). Children lack the maturity to make wise decisions with this free time, space, and lack of supervision. Many experience emotional trama such as fearfulness, child abduction and molestation. Alone, many play with guns or fire, experiment with drugs and alcohol, and associate with undesirables. Adults must assume responsibility for the child too young and inexperienced to be left alone (White, 1975). The typical school day for children does not coincide with the parent's work day. This was not a problem prior to the time mothers

in large numbers joined the work force outside the home. Schools and communities must examine who is caring for the children before and after school, and the quality of that care, to make better decisions as to changes that need to be made in the best interest of the child. Wallach (1993) points out that to offset negative effects of violence in a child's life, the child needs to develop meaningful relationships with a reduced number of responsible and caring adults during the day.

Stop dangerous aggressive acts now by early identification and remedial programs.

Longitudinal studies (Dodge, 1993) indicate it is possible to identify children as they enter school who are at high risk for later juvenile delinquency, violent crime, school dropout, and pyschiatric impairment. Twelve percent of all children in the U.S. experience mental health problems severe enough to require treatment. There is no way of estimating the number of unidentified children needing treatment. In one longitudinal study with 600 four-year-olds progressing through school, Dodge, Bates, and Pettit found that physically abused children are at risk for aggressive behavior because they view the world as a hostile place and acts of aggression solves the problems. Additionally, they found that children who live in stressful family environments are at risk for aggression and that children who live in homes with caring parents exhibit fewer nonagressive behaviors.

Honig's research (1993) found that mental health disorders can even be identified at earlier ages than those envolving Dodge's work with elementary age children. Caregivers can observe body clues for ascertaining the mental and emotional status of infants and toddlers. Telltale signs may include head banging, back arching, body stiffening, dull eyes, apathetic looks, hurting one's self frequently, indifference to parents at pick up time, and continuous biting or hitting of others with no prior agressive provocation. Clearly, this child and the family need immediate intervention and assistance.

Educators have experienced success in assisting the child who is a victim of violence. Wallach (1993) advocates this child must develop a meaningful relationship with an adult who provides consistency, offers structure and expresses clear expectations and limits, provides many opportunities for the child to express his feelings in play, storytelling (Abi-Nader, 1991), and painting and drawing. Novelli (1993) cites role playing as a positive method of helping children communicate with others and discuss what is on their mind. Wallach (1993) deems necessary the educator's ability to work successfully with the family and have the expertise to refer them to appropriate community agencies, clinics, churches, and self-help groups. Kohn (1991) states that instruction must be prosocial and include conflict resolution and methods of achieving personal goals that do not include force or manipulation. Punishment should focus on what the child is to do, rather than what is not to be done.

CONCLUSION

Children living in today's world in no way live in conditions that children were steeped in even a few decades previously despite the fact that children's basic needs have not changed. Changes in society have brought about both positive and negative changes to children's existence. It is important to recognize the macrosystem of interrelated stratum of the society that is responsible for these changes in order to sensibly view the causes of a condition and what to do to go about setting things right in that area.

DeLattre (1988) rejects the idea of the school, or probably any other single entity, becoming everything to everybody. He clearly asserts that bearing the public's trust in our educational system does not include the responsibility of curing all ills in society by taking on the responsibilities of family, church, and other social institutions and that schools must define what they can and can not do for the learner. The home, the school, and the community must unite in efforts, keeping in mind that that no single approach will fit all diverse and complex situations, before any constructive change can take place to better the lives of children (Meadows, 1992).

In summary, an ancient African proverb sums up the position advocates take concerning children:

"A whole community rears the child."

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